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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the relationship among statistical research, ethnographic research, and practice, all of which combine to generate an explanatory model of school board incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover. The research process that incorporates these variables involves (1) careful ethnographic descriptions of important educational problems; (2) the development of explanatory models based on ethnographic research; (3) the formulation of testable hypotheses based on the explanatory model; (4) verification through statistical research to test the hypotheses; and (5) reform of the model based on new empirical findings. This process is intended to bridge the gap between social science research and practice. The process was applied to data collected in school districts in which school board members were elected on nonpartisan tickets. Verification studies of the explanatory model uncovered statistically significant relationships between selected social, economic, and political variables and school board incumbent defeat, and between school board incumbent defeat and superintendent involuntary turnover. Related research is summarized in EA 008 018. (Author/DS)

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INCUMBENT DEFEAT AND SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER: FROM ASSUMPTIONS TO EXPLANATORY MODEL AND PRACTICAL RESULTS

By

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The purpose of this paper is to place the presentations that follow in a context of research, theory and practice in educational administration. It will attempt in this way to demonstrate that the rational process of research is not separated from practice and practical reality in education. It will demonstrate that research and practice are inextricably interrelated, each advancing the other, as the right leg advances the left leg but then must pause to allow the left to advance the right. Only in this way do "we" make smooth progress, together, not separately. The alternative is a sporatic, segmented and halting hopping that balances precariously at best and usually falls of its own weight.

The Beginning of a Line of Inquiry

The midwestern school district of Robertsdale was in a state of unresolved conflict during the late 1950's. This resulted in a school board incumbent defeat in that district in 1960. Through a chain of fortuitous circumstances, this incumbent defeat provided the opportunity to engage in a study resulting in an ethnographic description of a local school board which has become known as "The Robertsdale Case". (Iannoccone and Lutz, 1970)

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The Ethnographic Study

Using the participant observer method of the field ethnographer and guided by a set of tentatively held but theoretically derived assumptions (or statements), field observations were made for a three year period. The original assumptions were derived from small group theoretical positions and were structured on the generalized assumption that a school board operated as a social system within a larger social or mocro-system.

The data included the usual participant observer diary (observations and informant data). It included historical data as well as other data available from public records such as, minutes, newspaper articles, and official records of the school district and the state. All of these data were organized and used to verify, modify or reformulate the original assumptions. Restated assumptions were combined so as to provide an explanatory model of school board member incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover.

The Explanatory Model

The explanatary model developed from the Robertsdale Case was the type of model described by Caws (1974). It was the result of the operational model (observed by the researcher) and the representational model (in the minds of the natives). It identified the important and reoccurring variables indicated by the data and described the relationship among these variables. It was not only what occurred empirically or what was perceived phenomenologically but rather the relationship between these two models that produced certain results under specified conditions. The statements in the model described the data collected over a three year data collection period. Although not hypotheses, they were capable of being stated in hypothetical form. As such they

represented a step in theory building and were representative of the type of "grounded theory" referred to by Glasser and Strauss (1967). Hypotheses from grounded theory are derived from careful empirical observation as opposed to armchair meditation.

From Explanatory Model to Statistical Verification

Based on the explanatory model, three verification studies were undertaken in California. Each developed statistically testable hypotheses from the model. Each developed operational measures of the variables indicated in the model and a statistical design to determine if the relationship among the variables could be demonstrated statistically. One study tested the relationship between selected economic, social, and political variables and school board incumbent defeat (Kerkendall, 1966). The second tested the relationship between school board member incumbent defeat and superintendent involuntary turnover. (Walden, 1966). In these studies statistically significant relationships were demonstrated. The third piece of research investigated the relationship between incumbent defeat (and its assumed relation to change) and the succession of outsider superintendents. (Freeborn 1966). These studies will be reported by Professor Waldon. Together they seemed to verify the explanatory model.

Additional Verification

All of the above studies as well as the ethnographic study which developed the explanatory model were done in school districts where school board members were elected on non-partisan tickets. The question remained, do political parties affect the occurrence of incumbent school board member defeat in such a way so as to affect the relationship between that variable and the superintendent's tenure? Put another way, if the relationship between school board member incumbent defeat and involuntary superintendent turnover was so strong, could the intervention of party politics into the election (at least so far as having

Republicans run against Democrats for school board seats) upset this relationship? This question was investigated by Moen (1971). Several interesting relationships between party membership and incumbent school board member election or defeat were evidenced, but a relationship significantly beyond the .01 level between incumbent defeat in partison elections and involuntary superintendent turnover was demonstrated, further strengthening the explanatory model. That research will be reported by Dr. Moen.

No model or theory should remain unchallenged. Each challenge strengthens the theory for it either validates the original model and theory or specifies new conditions or raises new questions. Kirkendall's operational model used in California to test the model was used by LeDoux (1971) to test the model in New Mexico. At that time and in that state more than one half of the districts were moving downward in at least two of the operational variables, while in the California study all districts were up in all variables. The result in New Mexico was a poorer predictive value for the model than previously demonstrated. This led LeDoux and Burlingame (1973) to challenge the explanatory model originally presented by Iannoccone and Lutz (1970). LeDoux's study, its findings and a re-analysis of those data are presented by Professor Burlingame.

Based on the questions raised in the LeDoux-Burlingame article, Lutz (1975) responded regarding the nature of the explanatory model, proposing some changes in the operational model and the addition of a new variable operationalizing the "gap" between the school board and the school district proposed in the original explanatory model, assumed but never measured by previous verification studies attempting to account for incumbent defeat. As a result of that response, Garberina (1975) conducted a study of incumbent school board member defeat in Massachusetts. That study used the district's tax levy as an indicator of

school board response to community change. This variable was assumed to be a measure of the gap between the board and the community identified in the explanatory model but not measured in prior verification studies. Garberina's study was able to account for a large amount of the variance in "down" districts apparently left unaccountable in the LeDoux study. Dr. Garberina presents these data and his findings below. Based on his study, we are now attempting to predict, for the first time, the likelihood of school board incumbent defeat. We plan to do this during the 1977 Pennsylvania elections.

Another Branch From the Same Tree

Another parallel line of research is underway at this time. Based on the ethnographic description from which the original explanatory model was developed, a notion of school board council style was formulated. Explicit in the original field study was the fact that a school board develops a style of policy making behavior, over a period of time. This behavior is governed by a set of norms that sanction the behavior of board members as well as certain central office staff. These are enhanced by a broader set of behaviors at the county, state and national levels. Such behaviors are exhibited in various levels of school board association meetings and literature that operate as a socialization process shaping the values and behaviors of individual local boards and their members. Lutz (1975) identified this phenomenon as the "culture of school boards." Later (1975a) he posited a relationship between the conciliar behavior of a local school board, operationalized within the elite-arena continuum suggested (Bailey 1971) and the diversity of the community as measured by Lieberson (1969). Daniel Wittmer (1976) recently found significant relationships between this phenomenon and the degree of public satisfaction with the local school board and their responses to state mandates. He discovered persistent patterns of conciliar

behavior that could be identified either as elite or arena and discovered a phenomenon operating within school boards with elite values but behave in arena fashions. These he termed "anomic school board behavior". (see Gresson 1975)

The original model identified certain conditions that resulted in a gap between the community and the school board. This gap often resulted in incumbent school board member defeat, followed by increased non-unanimous voting on the board and within three years, involuntary superintendent turnover. These notions were tested in a series of statistically designed verification studies previously mentioned.

As the results of these verification studies were available, we returned to the original model to ask what we now knew or what else needed to be known. This process required a return to some additional ethnographic work. Presently a study is underway consisting of a twelve month participant observer study of an anomic school board. From this new branch of grounded research some other things may be hypothesized. It may be that our original variables of incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover represent the identification of symptomatic behaviors and not "causal" conditions.

The gap between the board and the community may well be the causative factor and this may be identified best by the relationship between the board's conciliar behavior and the community's diversity. The original nineteen socio-economic-political variables may only be symtomatic of anomic board behavior. It may be that this cancer (anomic behavior) is caused by the virus of "the gap" and the final result is death (involuntary superintendent turnover).

Summary

In addition to setting the stage for the reports of research to follow this paper has described a process of research that has resulted in both meaningful

theory and practical answers. This process involves: (1) careful ethnographic descriptions of important educational problems; (2) the development of explanatory models based on the ethnographic studies; (3) the formulation of testable hypotheses based on the grounded explanatory model; (4) conducting verification studies to test the hypotheses; (5) returning after each verification study to the model to ask how the model must be reformed; and (6) returning when necessary to the description of the empirical world to explain new or divergent findings, thus developing new hypotheses.

Such a process has proven useful in the research outlined here and reported below. Figure 1 depicts the relationships among practice, ethnographic studies and statistical research that has resulted in what appears - to be a very meaningful notion of local school governance.

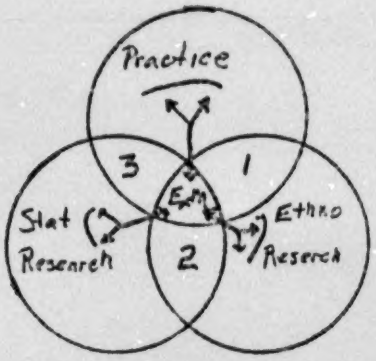

Figure 1. Model of Research and Practice in Theory Building

Figure 1 suggests that there is an overlap between practice and ethnographic studies (1); ethnographic studies and statistical research (2), and statistical research and practice (3). All merge, however, in the explanatory model (E M). It is through the prism of the explanatory model that each

makes it contribution to the other.

The explanatory model serves as a prism to display the data in a manner useful to the particular area of concern (i.e. statistical research, ethnographic research, or practice). As a prism breaks a beam of light into a spectrum capable of analysis, so the explanatory model displays the data in a fashion useful to the particular area. As a prism refracts the beam of light through one facet differently than through another so the explanatory model can provide one explanation useful to practice and another useful for statistical research. The word prism is chosen for the spectrum projected, as the light of data is meaningfully separated into its component parts, is different for practice, ethnographic and statistical research. None is less real than the other, rather more meaningful for the particular purpose of the respective audience. This model of the process of theory building may provide not only a fruitful road to research but also the bridge between research and practice.

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